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Charles W. Dabney*

A BETTER ERA

A BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS DE-
LIVERED AT THE UNIVERSITY OF
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PRESIDENT CHARLES WILLIAM DABNEY

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*A BETTER ERA

BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS
BY PRESIDENT CHARLES W. DABNEY

June 6, 1915

"Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?
The watchman said, The morning cometh, and also the night;
if ye will inquire, inquire ye."

Though our own land is as peaceful as this serene morning, it is impossible for us to withhold our sympathies from the nations on the other side of the ocean who are in such deep distress. Whether we will or not, every human instinct, every intellectual interest, fastens our thoughts upon the conditions there. It is useless, therefore, for us to try to think of other things, while our minds are so absorbed in the issue of these events. We may be neutral, but we cannot be indifferent.

During the early months of the war, we were too awe-struck to grasp the situation. Now, however, its terrible lessons are being driven home to us. Our deepest concern as students is that we make our own these fresh lessons of history and, especially, that we try to lay hold of new hope for human life. Even before the war is over, it is our duty to cut fresh channels in which the new tides of spiritual life may flow, that out of this collapse of civilization we had builded, out of this failure of all agencies which we had chosen, we may be led into a new and better era.

These last ten terrible months have shattered the theories of all the philosophers to whom we have been accustomed to look for guidance, as completely as they have dissipated the dreams of all the poets to whom we went for inspiration. Since the world began, men have been thinking and dreaming of a better era. A golden age or a millennium of righteous-

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ness has been the goal of the philosophies of all peoples. It was the dream of the Hindoos, the prophecy of the Hebrews, the hope of the Greeks, the plan of the Romans, and the teaching of Christ. But all the philosophies which promised to bring in the golden era appear now to have failed us.

Does this mean that all these philosophies were false? By no means. Immanuel Kant, the great prophet of the Germans, expressed the most profound thought of his people in words of eternal significance. His philosophy was founded upon two eternal moral maxims; the universality of the law of right, and the supreme consideration due each human personality. He taught that no necessity or particular consideration whatever can be weighed against the universal demands of the law of right. What is right for one man in one place is right for all men everywhere.

His second maxim teaches that man is not a thing, but a person, and that to treat each man as a person is the first law of all human relationships; that each man has his individual rights. The law of right is universal and each man's right is supreme. Believing that these doctrines were applicable to nations, as well as to individuals, Kant taught that the nations of the earth should live together in a federation of mutual respect and friendly co-operation, and thus establish universal peace. Is Kant's teaching false because his people have gone to war? Never! As he spoke to the German people one hundred and fifty years ago, so he speaks to all the nations of the earth today.

Like the German philosopher, the English poet taught us to hope for the "Parliament of Man,—The Federation of the World." Tennyson believed "the thoughts of men are widened with the process of the suns."

"We sleep and wake and sleep, but all things move;
The Sun flies forward to his brother Sun;
The dark Earth follows, wheel'd in her ellipse;
And human things returning on themselves
Move onward, leading up the golden year."

Such doctrines, hopes, and dreams are inherent in the human mind and heart, and are the foundations of all our thought of human progress. We cannot uproot them and continue to think. We cannot give them up and live.

In the course of history, man has had many discouragements in his hopes for universal peace and his plans for

human progress, but none, perhaps, more crushing than this catastrophe. For this war shows that we do not really recognize the universality of Kant's Law of Right, and that we are still far, far from the "Federation of the World" of Tennyson. If we must judge from the actions of the nations today, there is still no law but the law of the jungle, and no federation except the federation of cruelty and of hate.

And what a tremendous shock it was to all our theories! A year ago, many of us could have given a score or more of reasons why a great world war could never again occur. We believed that there were too many economic and political, as well as moral and religious, influences opposed to war.

Norman Angell had taught us that the idea that war promoted the material interests of the conqueror was a "Great Illusion," and, therefore, that the bankers and the economists would never permit another war. But money and business did not prevent war.

The militarists claimed that great armaments would prevent war. But we know now that the doctrine, "In time of peace, prepare for war," was a horrible falsehood. The supposed instruments of law and peace have proved the instruments of murder and destruction.

International socialism also failed. In July, the deputies of the societies in the various countries met in Brussels and passed the usual resolutions against war, but, in August, they were all marching under arms to the fratricidal contest.

Science, many thought, would certainly prevent war between educated nations. Biology had shown the folly of destroying the best of the nations, the seed-corn of the future. But science, too, sold herself to militarism and became its willing servant in making explosives for destroying this seed-corn.

Sad, indeed, was the failure of the peace societies. We did not expect much from their social meetings held in magnificent palaces, but some of us had hoped that great good would result from international peace tribunals and courts of arbitration. Although the peace societies were meeting in Switzerland at the time the armies were mobilizing, they had no more influence upon the nations rushing into war than the twittering sparrows have upon the railway trains dashing through the forests.

The statesmen of some of the nations labored to prevent war, but they, too, failed. Diplomacy, which was always looked upon as the trusted watchman of peace, became in those last days the willing tool of the war makers.

Saddest of all, Christianity, founded by the Prince of Peace, failed to prevent war. This war is man's new fall, his greatest fall since Christ came to save him. The whole drama of this war states in terrible terms the unchristianity of Christendom. It measures again the awful task that Christ undertook when he came to redeem mankind and called man to the establishment of a Divine Kingdom by love and sacrifice. Do we ask again with new urgency: "After all, is Christ's program for human society practical? Is he, indeed, the answer to the world's need? If he is, perhaps, the answer to the need of the individual human soul, can states be conducted under this Christ constitution? Is it not possible to govern the world by love?" By dreadnought and submarine, by Zeppelin and aeroplane, by mortar and howitzer; with torpedo and bomb, with shell and shrapnel, with dynamite and poisonous gas, turned against women and children, as well as fighting men, with a skill never equaled and a cruelty unsurpassed, the nations are answering with a thunderous "No!" "No!" say these voices of Hell, "There is no such thing as human love and brotherhood."

Christendom has yet to learn what the application of the principles of Christ demands in relation not only to personal, but also to social, industrial, and national lives.

What, then, is the lesson of this collapse of civilization. Religious-minded people think that it is a new revelation of God. This war is, in fact, the most apocalyptic thing in all history. It has broken the entail of the past. Modern European history has been said to date from the Napoleonic Wars. Our new modern history will date from 1914. We are now laying its foundations. The war has thus brought the world a magnificent opportunity to make a new beginning.

History teaches us that these moral catastrophes all have their causes. They are prepared by the acts of men and nations. Wise old Doctor Holmes said: "War is no accident, but an inevitable result of long incubating causes; inevitable as the cataclysms that swept away those monstrous births of primeval nations." If this be true, the occurrences of the

last few weeks, the intensification of the strife, the enlargement of its area and the tremendous issues, should make men look to the larger facts which lie behind these events.

For several decades our universities have been absorbed with the evolutionary philosophy. Up to the outbreak of this war, many of us had been taught to think of the future of mankind in terms of evolution, that is, that progress is made by slow and gradual steps only, or, as one has said, "by the aggregation of infinitesimal increments of advance." This way of looking at human things was due, of course, to the triumph of the evolutionary theory in natural science. Since the progress of Nature is so inconceivably slow, how absurd it is, they said, for us to be impatient with social wrong. It was unscientific to expect human society to improve any faster. It Nature takes so long to evolve the soul, how absurd for the theologians to teach that the soul can be new-born in a moment.

The historians of human thought will trace the great and all pervading influence of the theory of Darwin on the whole realm of social, political, and religious thinking and action. This newest materialism has blunted the edge of our religious thinking, and is largely responsible for the terrible error from which we are suffering today. But its end is near. Even before this cataclysm, we were coming to see that evolution by infinitesimal increments, while perhaps true up to a certain point in nature, was not a complete account of human life. There is much in science, as well as in history, that cannot be accounted for by its formula. De Vries teaches us now that evolution is not sufficient to account for many facts of plant life, and the bacteriologists tell us that it does not explain many phenomena in their field. All we are learning about the nature of matter leads us to the same conclusion. In other words, tremendous leaps have been discovered in nature which contradict the theory of Darwin. We believe now that there is in human history a revolutionary, as well as an evolutionary, element. Just as we believe that there are perfectly new personalities being born in the world which are more than rearrangements of the characteristics of their ancestors, so we believe that there have been clean, new beginnings, tremendous and sudden cataclysms in human society. Is not this one of them?

Why do we believe in revolution as well as evolution? Most men still believe that they are free. Then the moment we give a place to human freedom, we realize that the theory of evolution by infinitesimal degrees is insufficient to describe human life. We borrow evolution from nature, but nature's categories cannot explain human nature. When we come to study men, we must use a new term, we must speak of education. And education is an entirely different process from evolution. If this be so, the apocalypse, the revelation of truth through revolution, is a part of God's plan for the education of man.

We must believe, I say, that man is by his very nature endowed with freedom. If man chooses, he can go wrong. Sometimes he goes wrong for years together, sometimes whole nations go wrong for decades. Thus begins the downward process. See how it evolves. Evil appears to triumph everywhere; the wicked prosper more than the righteous, and the fool says in his heart that the wrong works better than the right.

Under all discouragement, however, the fight for righteousness goes on. There is in this world such a thing as judgment, and all this time judgment is accumulated. When men have been outraged until they will stand it no longer, then comes a revolution. Darkness falls. The wind of death wraps the nations in its wings. Civilizations sink in blood.

Now once more men see what sin means. All the evil hidden during the years is dragged out into the light of eternity. It is shown once again that evil does not succeed in God's world. The old Hebrew philosophy is again shown to be eternally right, and men realize that it is only another apocalypse, a moment of judgment.

But history teaches us that such cataclysms are not the end, they are the beginning. There is in them not merely a possibility, there is a promise of progress as sudden and immense as was the coming of the judgment. Time and time again there has come, breaking out of the wreck of the past, one of these great forward leaps in history. May we not in this dark hour look forward to such a dawn?

Moreover, what we hope for is not simply a zig-zagging, slow-climbing, evolutionary path up the height of civilization

from which we have fallen, but it is the beginning of a new era on a new moral basis.

Thus it is, that as our eyes grow accustomed to the night, we see through the darkness the eternal stars pointing the true way of human progress, which is the way, not of evolution, but of revolution—of revolution directed by an all-powerful and righteous God, who is also a God of Mercy and of Love.

What we have now to look forward to is a new epoch which God has initiated by his judgment, and in which he will regenerate and heal, if men will only turn to him. Not evolution, therefore, but the judgment and the mercy of God are the ideas which come to us today with new power and hope, as we look through the symbolism of this apocalypse into the eternal truth.

Will men only respond to God's summons in this judgment? Never in history has man had such an opportunity to learn what pride and war mean. Twenty-five million men will probably experience it in their own bodies and souls, and perhaps a billion other men, women, and little children will suffer its horrors with them before this war is ended. And, alas, the conclusion of the war will not end this suffering. Unborn children will bear its burdens and sorrows for ages to come. Will men learn the lesson and pass from the condemnation of war to the condemnation of the spirit that makes war? Will they see the revelation, will they then receive it and learn its lesson? Under the tuition of His Spirit, we believe they will. This is God's apocalypse. Again a tremendous, forgotten Biblical truth is receiving transcendent expression. Sin is working death.

What, then, is the conclusion of the whole matter? On what ground may we hope for the progress of humanity? Only on the ground that God rules. Only on the ground that God so loved the world that he gave His Son to save it.

No man ever drank deeper of the sorrows of war, no soldier ever rose to grander heights of human service than General Lee. I give you this statement of his faith in Providence and his hope for the future of mankind. Speaking to his people in the time of their defeat and despair, General Lee uttered these memorable words containing the essence of our Christian philosophy:

"My experience of men has neither disposed me to think worse of them, nor indisposed me to serve them; nor, in spite of failures, which I lament; of errors, which I now see and acknowledge, or, of the present aspect of affairs, do I despair of the future. The truth is this: The march of Providence is so slow, and our desires so impatient, the work of progress is so immense, and our means of aiding it so feeble, the life of humanity is so long, and that of the individual so brief, that we often see only the ebb of the advancing wave, and are thus discouraged. It is history that teaches us to hope."

Does history give us hope today? Has Christianity failed to influence the lives of men and nations? Have these twenty centuries counted for nought? Let us see.

When we ask in what respect the modern world is an improvement upon the ancient, a common answer is that the development of the physical forces and their applications in production, transportation, and the other conveniences of life are the great achievements. If this is all, we are not surprised that we have made no progress toward the abolition of war, for the development of physical force only creates more wealth and contributes little to man's spiritual life. Have we then made no spiritual progress in modern times? The evidence of our material civilization, exhibited in manufactures, commerce, and trade, and in the comforts of modern life, are on the surface. It is not so easy to prove our moral progress. The spiritual growth of man is necessarily slower. It is only through labor and sorrow that the soul is saved. The battle of the spirit against the flesh is terrible, in nations as well as in individuals. Often when a new fortress of righteousness seems about to be taken by the white-robed warriors of the soul, the black hordes of the elemental passions burst forth, and drive them back to the plains where the battle has to be begun all over.

But in spite of all these losses and discouragements, it is still true, is it not, that the great glory of the modern world is the development of a sense of humanity, and the realization of the brotherhood of man? Slowly, and through terrible struggles, man is learning that all men "should brothers be," and that "Above all nations is humanity."

This war itself is giving many opportunities for the further development of this spirit, proving anew its vitality and power to heal. It is true, is it not, that while on the one side there never was such a cruel war, on the other there never were so many manifestations of the sympathy of man for man? The work of the Red Cross and of the Relief Commissions shows that even during this terrible time the spirit of humanity is growing. Never in history has there been such an overwhelming outpouring of generous aid and tender sympathy, regardless of the race, rank, and nationality of the suffering. This is the true neutrality; this is the one encouraging thing in these sad months. Strange as it may seem at such a time, the whole world, as well as America, is developing an ever stronger sympathy.

We are deeply concerned as to the influence of this catastrophe upon these young men. While it is undoubtedly true that war, through service to the sick and wounded, contributes to our spiritual development, its influence upon the young is, in all other respects, vicious. The war spirit exploits physical prowess and martial success, glorifying the heroism of the soldier, the professional destroyer of human life. We are bound to admire self-sacrificing courage wherever found, and nothing perhaps appeals to the young like the heroism of battle.

But the mere warrior is not the highest type of hero. Wordsworth, it is said, wrote his "Happy Warrior" as a protest against the attention bestowed upon the military characters developed in the French war, and especially against the praise heaped upon Lord Nelson, whose public life was even then stained by a great crime.

"Who is the happy Warrior? Who is he
That every man in arms should wish to be?" * * *
"It is the generous Spirit, who, when brought
Among the tasks of real life, * * * * *
Makes his moral being his prime care; * *
More skilful in self-knowledge, even more pure,
As tempted more; more able to endure,
As more exposed to suffering and distress;
Thence, also, more alive to tenderness."

But the love of fight is an instinct inherited from the countless generations of men. Through physical contest largely, man has attained to his present position, and it is to

this love of contest that the statesmen and the generals appeal when they call men to war. We are dealing here with something original, natural, universal, and, I believe, also indestructible,—a force that lies deeper in human nature than ambition or love of self.

Now since this love of warfare is one of the strongest natural instincts, it is hopeless to undertake its total suppression. The impulse is closely related to the instinct of self-preservation, and to those of hunger and of sex, which, we know, can never be extirpated so long as the race lives. The problem, then, is not how to eradicate this love of contest, but how to direct it into proper channels.

Just as we have utilized the great natural forces for useful purposes, so we must direct these great natural instincts in such a way that they shall become humanizing and creative, instead of cruel and destructive. Lightning was regarded by primitive man as purely destructive. Jove cast his bolts in anger and for the punishment of men; but electricity, first caught from the clouds by Franklin, has been thoroughly mastered by Volta, Faraday, and Edison, until now it is accepted as the most serviceable instrument of human welfare, operating our machinery, lighting our habitations, and flashing our thoughts around the world.

Precisely in this manner we have conquered some of these primordial instincts. Hunger, a brutal passion in the savage, has been at least partially refined, until now all civilized men eat and drink without fighting, and some of us even in accordance with the laws of dietetics. So, too, the passion of sex, which among early men wrought frightful brutality, and which has been in all ages the curse of civilization, has now become among moral people the greatest constructive force of human society—bringing together the family, which is the unit of society, the unit of government, the unit of church, and the beginning of Heaven on Earth.

In similar manner, we must civilize this terrible passion for war and convert this natural fighting instinct from barbarous and destructive uses to humane and beneficent ends. The fierce impulses that stir nations to war must be applied to mercy, instead of to misery, to rescue, instead of to ruin, to life, instead of to death.

It cannot be true that there is no better employment for the patriotism of one people than the destruction of some other people. Why not sacrifice ourselves for human improvement rather than for human destruction? "Much remains to conquer still," as Milton said to Cromwell, "Peace has her victories no less renowned than War." Surely there is enough misery in this world for us to fight without adding the misery of war. Why not, then, conscript our young men for an army to make war on the evils of our present society, to lessen the toil and pain, the hardness and the agony which nature imposes on her children? Heroism not less splendid, contests not less perilous than those on the blood-stained fields of Europe, await men everywhere in the fields of science and of service.

These humanitarian tasks may be unromantic—they are usually unexciting—but they often try men's hearts as severely as any battle. The courage of the soldier is strongly sustained by companionship. Whether marching into battle or lying in a trench, he has the support of his fellows and looks forward to promotion and to glory. Many plain men are daily dying in solitude for humanity. The professional soldier leads a heathful and routine life which may last for years, and has in his whole career only one day, or perhaps one hour, of danger, while some of our ordinary workers are daily risking their lives without any suspicion that they are acting the part of heroes. The miner enters each day into the tunnel where he may be crushed, smothered, or blown up; the riveter works at his perilous task high in the air on the skeleton of a many-storied building; the physician faces disease without fear striving to overcome some great epidemic; the explorer tramps hundreds of miles through trackless swamps and forests filled with wild men and beasts; the missionary seeks some far-a-way land and commits the life of his family to a savage people whom he seeks to save—none of these think they are heroes. They are only doing their duty. Such men, as well as those who fight our physical battles, are true soldiers.

"Dream not helm and harness
The sign of valor true;
Peace hath higher tests of manhood
Than battle ever knew."

The man who stood at the head of my class at the University, a fine classical scholar, immediately on graduation, asked the American Board of Foreign Missions to send him to some needy place that no one else would take. It was important at the time, for the sake of humanity, that a station be established in that far-a-way corner of Alaska inside the Arctic circle, known as Cape Prince of Wales. Harry Thornton accepted the task and went there with his young wife to establish a mission for a small tribe of uncivilized people. After laboring six years without seeing a man of his own race, he was assassinated by some of the people he was trying to help. But before he died, Thornton had started a school and a church which have since become the center of civilization for all that region.

Never was there a nobler band of soldiers, than the small one organized by Major Reed of Virginia to study yellow fever in Cuba. Reed and his companions, Carroll and Lazear, accomplished their appointed task and then gave up their lives. No deed of battle ever surpassed the self-sacrifice of Lazear, who deliberately let mosquitoes settle on his hand and infect him with yellow fever. He was willing to sacrifice himself, in order that the world might be delivered from a scourge which had caused the death of more Americans than all our wars.

It is not necessary, either, to go to foreign lands in order to give one's life in this way. Howard Taylor Ricketts, of Rush Medical College, Chicago, and Thomas Brown McClintic, of the University of Virginia, both sacrificed their lives in similar manner in order to discover the cause and cure of Rocky Mountain fever.

The present war has also brought forth heroes of science and humanity. The war against typhus in Serbia has been conducted by a noble band of physicians, many of them Americans. James F. Donnelly, of Brooklyn, and Ernest P. Magruder, of Washington, both officers of the American Red Cross, have already given their lives for this cause. We, of Cincinnati, may well be proud of the heroism of our fellow townsman, Doctor Paul Morton Lane, who, after recovering from the typhus contracted in Serbia, has returned to help that afflicted people.

But it is not necessary to be a soldier or army surgeon to give your life for humanity. Malaria and insects, disease and dirt, are just as dangerous as ball and shrapnel, ignorance and superstition. Brutality and savagery are often as firmly intrenched and as difficult to dislodge from their fortresses as maxims and howitzers behind barbed wire. It is a brave thing to be a soldier, but it is a still braver thing to be a savior.

Shall not the time come, therefore, when the application of this fighting instinct to the purposes of war will be considered a base prostitution of a noble force in human nature, a condition from which true men, with horror, will turn to devote themselves to the real wars of humanity? When that time does come, as it surely will, the famous names of history will not be those of great generals who have destroyed hostile armies, but those of the great leaders of thought who have directed the forces of science and of education for the healing and the salvation of the nations.

What, then, is the duty of our colleges and universities? We found that there was nothing wrong in fighting, provided you were fighting the right enemy, for the right cause, with proper weapons, and in a decent way. The problem before us is to apply this fighting spirit to the great tasks of science, medicine, education, religion, and mercy. Hundreds of noble causes call for thousands of trained men and women. Our universities and colleges should then constitute the general staff of this world army of philanthropy carrying on campaigns for the development of all human resources and for the destruction of the diseases of body and soul.

Colleges and universities are not merely places for study. They should be the brains and the hearts to direct the world in action. As Milton said:

"I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised and unbreathed, that never sallies out and sees her adversary, but slinks out of the race where that immortal garland is to be run for."

Let the colleges, then, declare a war for civilization; let them call to the colors of humanity the heroic youth of the world and join battle with the forces of ignorance and barbarism.

What shall be the part of our country in bringing in this "Better Era?" Some enthusiasts declare that we should be

the arbiter of the nations in this terrible crisis. This suggests a boastful spirit. By all means let us be peace-makers, if we may, but not Pharisees, thanking God that we are not as other men are. Let us first confess our own sins of aggression and cruelty. Let us be grateful for our situation between the seas, for our institutions, for our freedom, for our ideals, and, especially, for the privilege of ministering to those suffering in the war.

If this be our spirit, the opportunity for service to humanity will be even greater after than during the war. We hope it is the mission of America to show the nations how to live together like brethren in a great federation. If we only keep our hands clean of innocent blood, we may help to make peace among the nations. If we only keep our conscience clear, America may become the conscience of the world, and propagate the ideals of right over might, of law over force, of service over conquest.

But America can best serve mankind at this awful time by keeping right herself. The higher our standards of national conduct, the greater will be our power in the "Better Era." In this way only can we prepare our nation to discharge the task imposed upon her as the champion of humanity. Not for our own salvation, not for our own glory, but for humanity's sake, let us, therefore, now reconsecrate ourselves to truth and righteousness.

Gentlemen of the graduating class, as I stand before you this morning when you are about to leave these halls and enter upon the war of life, I am deeply impressed with the thought that it is to you and to those like you, in this and other lands, that the civilized world is looking to carry on this work for truth, for righteousness, and for peace. The students of today must save the world of tomorrow. May you all be knights of "A Better Era."

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